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IS IMMORTALITY
DESIRABLE?

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The Ingersoll Lecture, 1908

IS IMMORTALITY DESIRABLE?

BY

G. LOWES DICKINSON

*Author of "Letters of a Chinese Official," "The Greek View
of Life," "The Meaning of Good," "A Modern
Symposium," "Justice and Liberty"*



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THE INGERSOLL LECTURESHIP

*Extract from the will of Miss Caroline Haskell Ingersoll,
who died in Keene, County of Cheshire, New
Hampshire, Jan. 26, 1893.*

First. In carrying out the wishes of my late beloved father, George Goldthwait Ingersoll, as declared by him in his last will and testament, I give and bequeath to Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass., where my late father was graduated, and which he always held in love and honor, the sum of Five thousand dollars (\$5,000) as a fund for the establishment of a Lectureship on a plan somewhat similar to that of the Dudgeon lecture, that is — one lecture to be delivered each year, on any convenient day between the last day of May and the first day of December, on this subject, “the Immortality of Man,” said lecture not to form a part of the usual college course, nor to be delivered by any Professor or Tutor as part of his usual routine of instruction, though any such Professor or Tutor may be appointed to such service. The choice of said lecturer is not to be limited to any one religious denomination, nor to any one profession, but may be that of either clergyman or layman, the appointment to take place at least six months before the delivery of said lecture. The above sum to be safely invested and three fourths of the annual interest thereof to be paid to the lecturer for his services and the remaining fourth to be expended in the publication and gratuitous distribution of the lecture, a copy of which is always to be furnished by the lecturer for such purpose. The same lecture to be named and known as “the Ingersoll lecture on the Immortality of Man.”

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IT is with a certain sense of temerity that I stand before you to-night, a sense inspired not only by the place and the audience, but by the subject on which I am to speak.

I am succeeding in a famous university many distinguished men; and for that my only apology is the invitation with which I was honored. But also, I am to speak on the Immortality¹ of Man; and in defence of that audacity what can I say? Surely, it may be thought, a man must be very bold or very shameless who is prepared to discourse on such a theme. For either, it

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would seem, he must profess to know what the wisest have admitted to be beyond their ken; or he must be a charlatan, ready to talk about matters of which he knows nothing. These are hard alternatives; but they do not, I hope, exhaust the possibilities. If I venture to address you on this great subject, it is precisely because I do not suppose that you regard me as a preacher or a prophet. I am here, as I conceive, to make one speech in a debate which proceeds from century to century, which has been perpetually adjourned and never concluded. For the Immortality of Man is one of those great open questions which to my mind are of all the most worth discussing, even though they may never be resolved.

But, in saying that, I have already, no doubt, said what some of you will dispute; for to some of you, in all probability, the question is not open, but closed. There may be those here who are convinced on grounds of revealed religion that Man is immortal. To these I do not speak, for anything I could say must be an irrelevance or an impertinence. There may be others who are equally assured, on grounds of science, that man is mortal. Against them I shall not argue at length to-day; but I must state briefly that I do not agree with them, and why.²

The scientific denial of immortality is based upon the admitted fact of the connection between mind and brain; whence it is assumed that the death of the brain must involve the death of

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that, whatever it be, which has been called the soul. This may indeed be true; but it is not necessarily or obviously true; it does not follow logically from the fact of the connection. For, as Professor James has ably set forth in his lecture on "Human Immortality," that fact may imply not the production, but the transmission of mind by brain. The soul, as Plato thought, may be capable of existing without the body, though it be imprisoned in it as in a tomb. It looks out, we might suppose, through the windows of the senses; and its vision is obscured or distorted by every imperfection of the glass. "If a man is shut up in a house," Dr. McTaggart has remarked, "the transparency of the windows is an essential condition

of his seeing the sky. But," he wittily adds, "it would not be prudent to infer that if he walked out of the house he could not see the sky, because there was no longer any glass through which he might see it."³ My point is, that the only fact we have is the connection, in our present experience, of body and mind. That the soul therefore dies with the brain is an inference, and quite possibly a mistaken one. If to some minds it seems inevitable, that may be as much due to a defect of their imagination as to a superiority of their judgment. To infer wisely in such matters, one must be a poet as well as a man of science; and for my own part I would rather trust the intuitions of Goethe⁴ or of Browning than the ratiocination of Spencer or of Haeckel. For

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in making his hypotheses a man is determined, whether he knows it or no, by his habitual sense of what is possible; and in this curious universe so many things are possible which seem incredible to men who have never been astonished! Does it seem to you incredible that the body should be the habitation, not the creator, of the soul; that this should continue to live when that has died? I can only reply in the words of your own poet:—

Is it wonderful that I should be immortal as every
one is immortal?

I know it is wonderful — but my eyesight is equally
wonderful, and how I was conceived in
my mother's womb is equally wonderful ;
And passed from a babe, in the creeping trance
of a couple of summers and winters, to
articulate and walk. All this is equally
wonderful.

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And that my soul embraces you this hour, and
we affect each other, without ever seeing
each other and never perhaps to see each
other, is every bit as wonderful.

And that I can think such thoughts as these is just
as wonderful.

And that I can remind you, and you can think
them and know them to be true, is just as
wonderful.

And that the moon spins round the earth, and on
with the earth, is equally wonderful ;

And that they balance themselves with the sun
and stars is equally wonderful.

I do not of course suggest that from
the intuition of poets anything can be
finally concluded about the Immortal-
ity of Man. But I urge that when we
approach the subject it should be with
our imagination alert ; that our hypoth-
eses should be framed under a com-
pelling sense of our own limitations

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and the vastness of the universe; and that, if we approach the matter thus, the notion that something we may call a soul or self survives death will not seem to be ruled out by any of the known facts of our experience.

Thus much I have said merely to clear the ground for the point I propose to discuss. Considering it to be an open question whether or no immortality is a fact, I shall devote the rest of my time to the inquiry whether and in what sense it is desirable. In this inquiry I hope you will consider that I am addressing to you a series of questions; and though I shall not conceal my own opinions, it is not my object to impose them upon you. I have to deal with a number of different and mutually incompatible attitudes resulting

from different experiences and temperaments. These I shall pass in review, distinguish, and criticise; and each of you, I assume, meantime will be considering within yourselves what your own position is towards each of them.

The attitudes in question may be broadly distinguished as three. There are those who do not think about immortality, those who fear it, and those who desire it.

1. The majority of people I should suppose belong to the first class, except perhaps in certain crises of life. The normal attitude of men towards death seems to be one of inattention or evasion. They do not trouble about it; they do not want to trouble about it; and they resent its being called to their notice. And this, I believe, is as

true of those who nominally accept Christianity as of those who reject any form of religion. On this point the late Frederic Myers used to tell a story which I have always thought very illuminating. In conversation after dinner he was pressing on his host the unwelcome question, what he thought would happen after death. After many evasions and much recalcitrancy the reluctant admission was extorted: "Of course, if you press me, I believe that we shall all enter into eternal bliss; but I wish you would n't talk about such disagreeable subjects." This, I believe, is typical of the normal mood of most men. They don't want to be worried; and though probably, if the question were pressed, they would object to the idea of extinction, they can hardly be

said to desire immortality. Even at the point of death, it would seem, this attitude is often maintained. Thus Professor Osler writes:—

I have careful records of about five hundred death-beds, studied particularly with reference to the modes of death and the sensations of the dying. The latter alone concern us here. Ninety suffered bodily pain or distress of one sort or another, eleven showed mental apprehension, two positive terror, one expressed spiritual exaltation, one bitter remorse. The great majority gave no signs one way or the other; like their birth, their death was a sleep and a forgetting.⁵

2. It cannot, then, I think, be said that most men desire immortality; rather they are, in their normal mood, and even at the point of death, indifferent to the question. But most men

perhaps in some moods, and some men continually, do reflect upon the subject and have conscious and definite desires about it. Of these, however, not all desire immortality; and some are so far from desiring it that they passionately crave for extinction, and would receive the news that they survive death not with exultation, but with despair. The two positions are to be distinguished. On the one hand, a man may simply have had enough of life without having any quarrel with it, and may prefer to the idea of continued existence that of oblivion and repose. Such, according to Metchnikoff,⁶ would be the normal attitude of men if they were not habitually cut off before the natural term of life, a term which he puts at well over a hundred years. And such seems,

in fact, to be the attitude of some men even under present conditions. It is beautifully and classically expressed in the well-known epitaph written by the poet Landor for himself:—

I strove with none, for none was worth my
strife;

Nature I loved and next to nature art;

I warmed both hands before the fire of life;

It sinks and I am ready to depart.

On the other hand, there are those who not merely acquiesce in but desire extinction; and that, because they believe, on philosophic or other grounds, that any possible life must be bad. These are the people called pessimists; they are more numerous than is often believed; and they are apt to be regarded by the plain man with a certain moral reprobation. That this should be

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so is an interesting testimony to the instinctive optimism of mankind. But the optimism, it will perhaps be agreed, is commonly less profound than the pessimism. Whatever may be the promise of life, it is, as we know it, to those who look at it fairly and straight, very terrible, unjust, and cruel. And if any conceivable subsequent life must be of the same character as this, no freer from limitation, no richer in hope, no fuller in achievement, then the pessimist has at any rate a strong *prima facie* case. And this brings us to the obvious point that the desirability of a future life must depend upon its character, just as does the desirability of this one. So that it is relevant to ask those who acquiesce in or desire extinction whether or no there is some kind of life which,

if offered to them securely, they would be willing to accept after death.

3. Let us turn then to our third class, those who desire immortality, and ask them what it is they desire and whether it is really desirable. For a number of very different conceptions may be covered by the same phrase. And first, there are those who simply do not want to die, and whose desire for immortality is merely the expression of this feeling. Old people, so far as I have observed, often cling in this way to life, more often, indeed, than the young. Yet if they could put it fairly to themselves, they would, I suppose, hardly say that they would wish to go on forever in this life, with all their infirmities increasing upon them.⁷ Nothing surely is sadder, nothing meaner, than this

desire to prolong life here at all costs. The sick, the infirm, the aged, that we care for them as we do may be creditable to our humanity. But that they desire to be cared for, instead of to depart, is that so creditable to theirs? I will go further and say that to arrest any period of life, even the best, the most glorious youth, the most triumphant manhood, is what no reasonable man will rightly desire. To the values of life, at any rate as we know it now, the change we call growing older seems to be essential ; and we cannot wisely wish to arrest that process anywhere this side of death. I shall suppose that you agree with that and pass to another conception.

It may be held that life, as we know it, is so desirable that though it would

not be a good thing to prolong it indefinitely, it would be a good thing to repeat it over and over again. That we may treat this notion fairly, I will ask you to suppose that in none of these repetitions is there any memory of the previous cycles ; for every one, I expect, would agree that the repetition of a life, every episode of which is remembered to have occurred before, is a prospect of appalling tediousness. Supposing, however, that memory is extinguished at each death, we have a position that may be worth examining. It is, as many of you will remember, the position of that remarkable man of genius, Nietzsche ; and, if only for that reason, deserves a moment's consideration. Not only did Nietzsche believe it on physical grounds to be true, — on which

point I leave him to the tender mercies of physicists,—but—and this is what interests us here — he welcomes it as the great redeeming hope. He christens it “eternal recurrence,” and hails it in this passionate refrain :—

Oh ! How could I fail to be eager for eternity, and for the marriage ring of rings, the ring of recurrence ?

Never yet have I found the woman by whom I should like to have children, unless it be this woman I love ; for I love thee, O eternity !

For I love thee, O eternity !⁸

Thus Nietzsche ; but we, do we agree with him ? Do we, too, love this eternity ? The answer seems plain. So far as a man judges any life, his own or another's, to be valuable, here and now, in and for itself, apart from any consid-

eration of immortality, he will reasonably desire that it should be repeated as often as possible, rather than occur once and never again ; for the positive value he finds in it will be reproduced in each repetition. On the other hand, so far as he finds any life in itself not to be valuable, or that its value depends upon some other kind of immortality, the prospect held out by Nietzsche will leave him cold or fill him with dismay. This Nietzsche himself quite candidly recognizes.

“Alas!” he says, in another place :

Alas ! man recurrcth eternally ! The small man recurrcth eternally !

Once I had seen both naked, the greatest man and the smallest man — all-too-like unto each other — all-too-human even the greatest man !

All-too-small the greatest one ! That was my satiety of man. And eternal recurrence even of the smallest one ! That was my satiety of all existence.

Alas ! loathing ! loathing ! loathing !

We may say then with Nietzsche's clear approval — and I am sure common sense agrees with him — that such an immortality is valuable only for valuable lives. And Nietzsche, I fear, would not admit value in the lives of any of us in this room ; for the valuable men are the men yet to come, the Super-men. Still, we may, many of us, differing from Nietzsche, think our own lives valuable, in and for themselves, and in that case we may reasonably desire the only immortality Nietzsche can promise us. On the other hand, there is no reason, that I

have been able to discover, for accepting Nietzsche's cosmology. Quite other possibilities may, for aught we know, be open to us. And we may proceed to examine whether there are not conceptions of immortality which we should hold to be more desirable than this. Hitherto we have been dealing with the idea of prolongations or repetitions of life on earth. Let us now extend our imaginations to possibilities farther from our experience.

And first, let us take the Christian conception of immortality; and let us take it in its simple uncompromising form, the last judgment, and then heaven or hell for all eternity. I am aware, of course, that it is not in this form that many or most Christians now conceive the life after death. But the

old and simple view is of philosophic as well as historic importance ; and it is well worth considering here. Without discussing, at present, the exact nature of heaven and hell, and assuming the orthodox descriptions to be allegorical, let us suppose that by heaven we mean all that the noblest men would desire, and by hell all that the basest men would fear ; and let us ask, Would an immortality involving both heaven and hell be more desirable than extinction ? From the humanitarian point of view, which is now so prevalent, and with which I, at any rate, have no intention of quarrelling, I believe most men would reply that extinction would be better. Most good men who might with reason expect heaven would, I suspect, prefer to re-

sign it if they can only have it on condition that others — no matter though they be the wicked — are enduring hell. This, to my mind, is a notable advance on the morality exhibited in the often-quoted passage of Tertullian.⁹ But it must be remembered that spirits much nobler and profounder than he have accepted with solemn and deliberate approbation the doctrine of hell. Remember the astounding words of Dante, written over the gate of his Inferno: "It was justice that moved my High Maker; Divine Power made me, Wisdom Supreme, and Primal Love." Was Dante, then, less humane than smaller men of to-day? I doubt it; he had a deeper spring of tenderness as well as of sternness. But — and this is the point I want you to consider —

he believed in retribution. That I think is the root of the Christian idea, so far as it does not spring from mere cupidity or cruelty. That the wicked should be punished and the good rewarded, that, it affirms, is, in itself, a positive good far greater than happiness or perfection. The view is by no means extinct ; it underlies, I believe, most men's attitude towards punishment, in spite of the superficial prevalence of utilitarianism : it was passionately preached by Carlyle ;¹⁰ and I have myself heard a philosopher (need I say he was a Scotchman ?) argue that a world containing crime is better than a world free from it, because the punishment of crime is so transcendent a Good. I leave it to your own reflections to what extent you share these

views. For my own part, in my deliberate judgment, I regard them with something approaching horror. I do not hold that there is any value in punishment, except in so far as it improves the criminal or deters others from crime. Whether, and to what extent, the idea of hell has ever deterred from crime I do not now inquire. In any case, it is the idea, not the fact, that has deterred ; so that, from this point of view, the most that could be said to be desirable would be that the idea should be maintained, not that there should exist any corresponding fact. Even that much, however, I could not myself admit ; for I believe the penalties of human law to be a surer deterrent, so far and so long as such deterrents are necessary at all. I do

not think, therefore, that even the idea, much less the fact, of hell, has any justification from that point of view. And as to the improvement of the criminal, that is ruled out in the Christian hell, for it is precisely part of his punishment that he is, and knows himself to be, eternally wicked. I judge then, and I expect that most of you agree with me, that if we desire immortality, it is not for the sake of retribution, regarded either as a good in itself or as a means to good ; and that being so, the notion of hell, left stripped of that support, is so dreadful that we should prefer universal extinction to an immortality involving that.

If this contention be accepted, it is natural next to suggest that the immortality that is desirable would be

some kind of heaven not conditioned by the existence of a hell. But in that case, what are we to mean by heaven? If I am not much mistaken, there are few intelligent people — probably there is no one in this audience — who look forward with real satisfaction to the traditional Christian heaven. It has always been extraordinarily difficult to picture a condition of perfect satisfaction and goodness. The “Paradiso” of Dante is indeed, for its superhuman beauty, an achievement one might have thought must be impossible to human genius. Yet do we feel exactly that we wish to enter it? And no one is likely, I think, in such a matter to surpass Dante. My conclusion is that the object of our desire is in fact unknown to us, and

unimaginable save in the faintest and most symbolical adumbrations. Does it follow, then, that we have no interest in heaven? I do not think so. But rather, that by heaven we really mean the ultimate term of a process in which we are engaged, of the end of which we can only say that it is Good. I say "we"; and I say so because I think that there are many people who in this matter agree with me; otherwise I should hardly be speaking here. But at this point it may really be more modest to say "I," to tell you simply how I feel, and to ask you whether you feel the same.

I find then that, to me, in my present experience, the thing that at bottom matters most is the sense I have of something in me making for more

life and better. All my pain is at last a feeling of the frustration of this; all my happiness a feeling of its satisfaction. I do not know what this is; I am not prepared to give a coherent account of it; I ought not, very likely, to call it "it," and to imply the category of substance. I will abandon, if necessary, under criticism, any particular terms in which I may try to describe it; I will abandon anything except Itself. For It is real. It governs all my experience, and determines all my judgments of value. If pleasure hampers it, I do not desire pleasure; if pain furthers it, I do desire pain. And what I feel in myself, I infer in others. If I may be allowed to use that ambiguous and question-begging word "soul," then I agree with

the poet Browning that "little else is worth study save the development of a soul." This is to me the bottom fact of experience. And no one can go any further with me in my argument who does not find in my words an indication, however imperfect, of something which he knows, in his own life, to be real.

What, then, is it that this which I call the "soul" seeks? It seeks what is Good; but it does not know what is ultimate Good. As a seventeenth-century writer has well put it: "We love we know not what, and therefore everything allures us. As iron at a distance is drawn by the loadstone, there being some invisible communication between them, so is there in us a world of Love to somewhat, though

we know not what in the world that should be. There are invisible ways of conveyance by which some great thing doth touch our souls, and by which we tend to it. Do you not feel yourself drawn by the expectation and desire of some great thing?"¹¹ This "great thing" it is our business to find out by experience. We do find many good things, but there are always other and better beyond. That is why it is hazardous to fix one's ideal, and say finally, "This or that would be heaven." For we may find, as the voyagers did in Browning's "Paracelsus," that the real heaven lies always beyond; beyond each Good we may attain here; but also, which is my present point, beyond death. The whole strength of the case for immortality,

as a thing to be desired, lies in the fact that no one in this life attains his ideal. The soul, even of the best and the most fortunate of us, does not achieve the Good of which she feels herself to be capable and in which alone she can rest. The potentiality is not fully realized. I do not infer from this that life has no value if the Beyond is cut off. That, I think, is contrary to most men's experience. The Goods we have here are real Goods, and we may find the Evil more than compensated by them. But what I do maintain is that life here would have indefinitely more value if we knew that beyond death we should pursue, and ultimately to a successful issue, the elusive ideal of which we are always in quest. The conception

that death ends all does not empty life of its worth, but it destroys, in my judgment, its most precious element, that which transfigures all the rest; it obliterates the gleam on the snow, the planet in the east; it shuts off the great adventure, the adventure beyond death.

Every one almost, I cannot help thinking, who feels at all on such matters, must feel with me on this point, if he could give his feelings full sway unchecked by his denials or his doubts. Every one not immediately in the grip of intolerable Evil, but looking back with impassioned contemplation on Good and Evil alike, must desire, I believe, to journey on in the quest of Good, whatever Evil he may encounter on the route. Americans at least, I

like to suppose, will respond to their own poet when in the passion of his visionary voyage from West to East, from present to past and future, he calls on his soul to embark for an adventure more hazardous and more alluring: —

Passage, immediate passage ! the blood burns in
my veins !

Away O soul ! hoist instantly the anchor !

Cut the hawsers — haul out — shake out every
sail !

Have we not stood here like trees in the ground
long enough ?

Have we not grovel'd here long enough, eating
and drinking like mere brutes ?

Have we not darkened and dazed ourselves with
books long enough ?

Sail forth — steer for the dark waters only,
Reckless O soul exploring, I with thee, and thou
with me ;

For we are bound where mariner has not yet
dared to go,

And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.

O my brave soul !

O farther, farther sail !

O daring joy, but safe ! are they not all the seas
of God ?

O farther, farther, sail !

My contention then is that immortality is desirable, if immortality means a fortunate issue of the quest of our souls. But the use of the word soul reminds me of a whole series of ambiguities and confusions which I must not pass over in silence. The subject of the Ingersoll lecture is the "Immortality of Man," and "Man" might conceivably be taken to mean Humanity. Positivists hold that the only immortality which an individual can expect is the perpetuation of his in-

fluence and of his memory among future generations. This abiding memory and record Comte named "subjective immortality," and held out, as the great stimulus to good conduct, the prospect of admission into the company of positivist saints. A similar view is held by many men of more imagination and less system than Comte. Thus Mr. George Meredith is constantly exhorting us to live in our offspring, physical or spiritual, and to dismiss from our minds as at once silly and base any desire for a continuance of personal life.¹² That this kind of immortality may really be, to some minds, desirable, I do not dispute; nor do I deny it a certain nobility. But it is not what men commonly have in mind, nor what I have had in mind, in

considering this question. I have meant the perpetuation of one's "self" beyond death, the realization of one's ideal in one's self, not in some other people to be possibly produced in some indefinite future. But, then, what is this "self" of which I argue that it is desirable it shall be perpetuated? This is a very difficult question, on which I can here only touch; but it may be worth while to distinguish two views. First, the soul or self may be regarded simply as a substance; and in postulating it as immortal we may mean merely that the substance is not destroyed by death. In this view no continuity of consciousness is assumed. It is held that we shall survive death but shall not be aware of it, just as there may lie behind our present lives a series

of other lives of which we have no knowledge. The identity of the person, in this view, consists, not in his knowing himself to be the same person, but in his being so in fact. The whole series of his actions and feelings in one life are determined by those of a previous, and determine those of a subsequent life. Every lesson learned, every faculty acquired, every relation formed at any stage, is carried over into the next; so that, for example, the musical faculty of an infant prodigy might be the consequence of musical training in a previous life, and love at first sight the consequence of affections fostered in earlier incarnations. The question then for us to raise is, whether that kind of immortality would be desirable? Most people, I believe, would

be inclined, to begin with, to answer in the negative. For, they might urge, it is to all intents and purposes exactly the same thing whether my present personality is determined completely by my ancestors and my environment, as it is on the positivist assumptions, or whether it is determined by some substance which you call "me," but of which I have not and never shall have any memory or care, and which again, in some future phase, will have no memory or care for the present "me."

This view is plausible and natural, but I think I dissent from it. I am inclined to agree with Dr. McTaggart,¹³ when he argues that a survival of the substance of one's self would be desirable, even though it carried with it no consciousness of survival. It is,

I think, a really consoling idea that our present capacities are determined by our previous actions, and that our present actions again will determine our future character. It seems to liberate us from the bonds of an external fate and make us the captains of our own destinies. If we have formed here a beautiful relation, it will not perish at death but be perpetuated, albeit unconsciously, in some future life. If we have developed a faculty here, it will not be destroyed, but will be the starting-point of later developments. Again, if we suffer, as most people do, from imperfections and misfortunes, it would be consoling to believe that these were punishments of our own acts in the past, not mere effects of the acts of other people, or of an indiffer-

ent nature over which we have no control. The world, I think, on this hypothesis would at least seem juster than it does on the positivist view, and that in itself would be a great gain. I agree, therefore, with Dr. McTaggart that an immortality which should imply the continuance of a self-substance, even without a self-consciousness, would be desirable. But I also hold that much more desirable would be an immortality which carried with it a continuance of consciousness. Let us now take that hypothesis and consider how much or how little is implied in such continuance.

To begin with, then, our present experience tells us that complete memory is not essential to continuity of consciousness. The content of our memory

is, in fact, always changing. Some things drop out and others come in. Parts of our past may disappear, temporarily at least, from our consciousness, so that to be told of them is like being told of the experience of some other person. Again, every night, in sleep, there is a complete break in continuity. So that we may say that we should consider ourselves the same person after death if there were just enough continuity for us to know and judge that we, who are dead, are that same person who just now was alive. True, much more than this is implied in what most people who take any interest in the subject demand or hope from immortality. They hope, in particular, to meet again friends they have loved here; and there must be few people who, in

the face of death, have not felt this desire. It is, of course, possible that this might occur, and I am inclined to agree that it would be desirable. But I think that perhaps in that one may be mistaken. All that I am quite clear about is that it would be desirable that this same person who now is should continue to exist after death, and to know that he is the same person; and that this continued existence should involve the possibility of a development of latent faculties for Good up to that perfection after which, without being able fully to define it, we are always seeking. As to the whole content of what would be desirable, I should think it wise to reserve judgment till fuller experience and knowledge enlighten us.

In particular, I hesitate to dogma-

tize on one point which is raised by the philosophies and religions of mysticism. Is it conceivable that what would really be good would be that our self should somehow be taken up into a larger World-self? I use purposely the ambiguous phrase "taken up" because I wish further to distinguish. If it be meant that our self should be absorbed in another, so as to lose its identity and consciousness, then I cannot see in that anything good or desirable. But if it were possible to be included in a larger self without losing one's own self, so that one could say "I am somehow that Self" then, for aught I know, that might be good and the best. But since most of us in the West would, I suppose, admit that such a condition is one of which we have not even a proxi-

mate experience, this notion can only remain for us a mere idea or possibility which we cannot begin to fill in with the imagination.

To sum up, then, the immortality which I hold to be desirable, and which I suggest to you as desirable, is one in which a continuity of experience analogous to that which we are aware of here is carried on into a life after death, the essence of that life being the continuous unfolding, no doubt through stress and conflict, of those potentialities of Good of which we are aware here as the most significant part of ourselves. I hold that the desirability of this is a matter of plain fact, and that in putting it forward I am giving no evidence of superstition, weakness, or egotism, but on the contrary am recog-

nizing the deepest element in human nature. Some of you, probably, will agree with this; others will strongly disagree; and to those who disagree I have no further arguments to address; we disagree invincibly and finally.

But there is one point on which I must touch in conclusion. For even those who agree with me on the question of desirability may still hold that it is of little use to put forward as desirable something which we cannot know to be true, or which, as they may hold, we know not to be true. It was with this point that I began, and with it I will finish. I must repeat, then, that it is mere dogmatism to assert that we do not survive death, and mere prejudice or inertia to assert that it is impossible to discover whether we do or

no. We in the West have hardly even begun to inquire into the matter; and scientific method and critical faculty were never devoted to it, so far as I am aware, previous to the foundation, some quarter of a century ago, of the Society for Psychical Research. There are, and always have been, a number of alleged facts suggesting *prima facie* the survival of death. But these facts have always been exploited by superstition and credulity, or repudiated by the prejudices of enlightenment. They are now, at last, being systematically and deliberately explored by men and women of intelligence and good faith bent on ascertaining the truth. It would be premature to suggest that any truth on this subject has been ascertained; but it is my own opinion that the re-

cent investigations conducted by the Society, and published in their "Proceedings,"¹⁴ have made it incumbent upon students to take into serious account the hypothesis that persons survive death. The fact of survival, it is true, would not carry with it the proof of immortality in the strict sense of the term ; but it would destroy the principal argument against it. Such inquiries, therefore, it might be supposed, and such results would excite a very widespread interest. Yet such is not the case ; and I believe the reason to be that there is no general conviction that the question is one of immense importance to the value of life.¹⁵ My contention is that it is ; that there is a kind of immortality which, if it were a fact, would be a very desirable one. To ask

the question, as I have been doing, whether you agree with me in this; to invite you to sift your feelings and to make yourselves clear as to what they really are, is therefore, in my opinion, a procedure which has a direct bearing upon the pursuit of positive knowledge. For unless you think it really important to know the truth, you will never pursue it nor encourage those who do. You will content yourselves with a lazy acquiescence either in the dogmas of religion or in those of science, and will regard inquirers who take the question seriously either as harmless cranks or as disreputable charlatans. Many of them are, but some of them are not, and none of them need be from the nature of the topic. And in asking you to-night, as clearly as I can, the ques-

tion, Do you want immortality, and in what form ? I conceive myself to be doing something very practical. I am not merely asking you — though that in itself is important — to become clear with yourselves on a point of values ; I am asking you further to take seriously a branch of scientific inquiry which may have results more important than any other that is being pursued in our time.

NOTES

NOTES

Note 1, page 1. I have used the word Immortality, throughout this lecture, to cover any prolongation of the life of the individual beyond death. The survival of death is not, of course, identical with, and does not imply, immortality, in the proper sense of the term. But if it were known that survival of death were a fact, the principal argument against immortality would disappear. For our only reason for supposing that we do not live forever is our experience of death.

Note 2, page 3. The dogmatic and, as I think, unscientific attitude of some men of science is illustrated by Professor Münsterberg's little book *The Eternal Life*. He says (page 6), "Necessity moves the stars in the sky, and necessity moves the emotions in my mind. No miracle can break these laws, can push a single molecule from its path, or create a sensation in a mind, when the body does not work, when the

brain no longer functions." I have dealt in the text with the point of the connection between mind and brain. But I have not there dealt with the point of heredity. There is evidence that mental as well as physical qualities are transmitted hereditarily. And if it could be demonstrated that the mental qualities of a person may be completely accounted for in that way, the hypothesis of a mental entity preëxisting independently of the body would become extremely improbable. On the other hand, (1) such complete demonstration does not exist. Heredity is a hypothesis which seems to account plausibly for some of the facts, but the limits of its applicability have yet to be determined. And (2) to rule out preëxistence would not be necessarily to rule out post-existence, though I think it would make it less probable. The point I wish to make is, that in the present state of our knowledge (or ignorance) on these subjects the hypotheses which science finds it convenient to use and test ought not to be set up to discredit any specific and independently verified facts which make *prima facie* against those hypotheses. And I

regard the question of the survival of death, at present, as an open one, (1) because there are certain facts which seem possibly to point to survival, (2) because there is not, and probably cannot be, a demonstration of the contrary. The question of heredity in its bearing on preëxistence is discussed by Dr. McTaggart in *Some Dogmas of Religion*, page 124 seq.

Note 3, page 5. McTaggart, *Some Dogmas of Religion*, page 105 seq.

Note 4, page 5. The principal sayings of Goethe upon the subject of a life after death have been collected by Dr. Wilhelm Bode in a little book entitled *Meine Religion — Mein politischer Glaube, von J. B. v. Goethe*. I translate here a few of the passages: —

“When a man is as old as I am, he is bound sometimes to think about death. This thought leaves me in perfect peace, for I have a firm conviction that our spirit is a being of indestructible nature; it works on from eternity to eternity; it is like the sun which though it seems to set to our earthly eyes, does not really set but shines on per-

petually. Do you think a coffin can impose upon me ?

“No good man allows himself to be robbed of his belief in immortality. The continuance of personal life does not conflict at all with the observations I have been making for so many years past on the nature of Man and of all living creatures. On the contrary, it derives from them fresh confirmation.”

“The conviction that our life continues springs for me from the conception of activity; for, if I work without ceasing to the end, Nature is bound to assign me another form of existence, when the present one no longer suffices for my spirit.”

Perhaps I ought in candor, considering the subject and content of this lecture, to quote also the following: —

“I could not bear to renounce the happiness of believing in a future life; indeed, I could say, with Lorenzo di Medici, that they are dead even for this life who hope for no other; but such unintelligible matters lie too far away to be an object of daily reflection and confusing speculation. And

further, if a man believes in survival, let him be happy in silence; he has no occasion to make a fuss about it. I observed, in connection with Tiedge's *Urania*, that Saints like nobles are a kind of Aristocracy. I found silly women who gave themselves airs because, with Tiedge, they believed in immortality; and I had to undergo a very obscure cross-examination on the subject. However I annoyed them by saying: 'I have no objection to being blessed with another life after this one is over; only I do hope I shan't meet there any one who believed in it here. Otherwise I shall have a most unpleasant time. The saints will all flock round me and say: "Well, were n't we right? Did n't we tell you so? Is n't it just as we said?"' And so one would be bored even in heaven!'"

"A preoccupation with ideas of immortality is for the leisured classes, and for women who have nothing to do. A sensible man, who wants to be something decent here, and so has to struggle, fight, and work, leaves the future life in peace and is active and useful in this one. Besides, thoughts about immortality are for people who have n't

come off very well in the way of happiness here; and I imagine that if the good Tiedge had had better fortune he would have had better thoughts."

Note 5, page 11. Science and Immortality, page 36.

Note 6, page 12. See his book The Nature of Man.

Note 7, page 15. Cf. Tennyson's Titibonus:—

"I ask'd thee, 'Give me immortality.'

Then didst thou grant mine asking with a smile,
Like wealthy men who care not how they give.
But thy strong Hours indignant work'd their
wills,

And beat me down and marr'd and wasted
me,

And tho' they could end me, left me maim'd
To dwell in presence of immortal youth,
Immortal age beside immortal youth,
And all I was in ashes."

Note 8, page 18. "Thus spake Zarathustra," Eng. Trans. by A. Tille, Works, vol. viii, page 341.

Note 9, page 23. See Gibbon, Decline and Fall

of the Roman Empire, vol. ii, page 27 of Bury's edition. The passage is as follows: —

“How shall I admire, how laugh, how rejoice, how exult, when I behold so many proud monarchs and fancied gods groaning in the lowest abyss of darkness; so many magistrates, who persecuted in the name of the Lord, liquefying in fiercer fires than they ever kindled against the Christians; so many sage philosophers blushing in red-hot flames, with their deluded scholars; so many celebrated poets trembling before the tribunal not of Minos, but of Christ; so many tragedians, more tuneful in the expression of their own sufferings; so many dancers —” But here Gibbon cuts short the quotation, and there is no reason for me to prolong it.

Note 10, page 24. See Latter-day Pamphlets. No. 2. Model Prisons.

“And so you take criminal caitiffs, murderers, and the like, and hang them on gibbets ‘for an example to deter others.’ Whereupon arise friends of humanity, and object. With very great reason, as I consider, if *your* hypothesis be correct. What

right have you to hang any poor creature 'for an example'? He can turn round upon you and say, 'Why make an "example" of me, a merely ill-situated, pitiable man? Have you no more respect for misfortune? Misfortune, I have been told, is sacred. And yet you hang me, now I am fallen into your hands; choke the life out of me, for an example! Again I ask, Why make an example of *me*, for your own convenience alone?' — All 'revenge' being out of the question, it seems to me the caitiff is unanswerable; and he and the philanthropic platforms have the logic all on their side.

"The one answer to him is: 'Caitiff, we hate thee; and discern for some six thousand years now, that we are called upon by the whole Universe to do it. Not with a diabolic, but with a divine hatred. God himself, we have always understood, "hates sin," with a most authentic, celestial, and eternal hatred. A hatred, a hostility inexorable, unappeasable, which blasts the scoundrel, and all scoundrels ultimately, into black annihilation and disappearance from the sum of things. The path of it as the path of a flaming sword: he

that has eyes may see it, walking inexorable, divinely beautiful and divinely terrible, through the chaotic gulf of Human History, and everywhere burning, as with unquenchable fire, the false and death-worthy from the true and life-worthy; making all Human History, and the Biography of every man, a God's Cosmos in place of a Devil's Chaos. So is it, in the end; even so, to every man who is a man, and not a mutinous beast, and has eyes to see. To thee, caitiff, these things were and are, quite incredible; to us they are too awfully certain, — the Eternal Law of this Universe, whether thou and others will believe it or disbelieve. We, not to be partakers in thy destructive adventure of *defying* God and all the Universe, dare not allow thee to continue longer among us. As a palpable deserter from the ranks where all men, at their eternal peril, are bound to be: palpable deserter, taken with the red hand fighting thus against the whole Universe and its Laws, we — send thee back into the whole Universe, solemnly expel thee from our community; and will in the name of God, not with joy and exultation,

but with sorrow stern as thy own, hang thee on Wednesday next, and so end.' "

Note 11, page 31. Traherne. *Centuries of Meditation*, page 3.

Note 12, page 36. See e. g. his poems, *Earth Man* and *A Faith on Trial*.

Note 13, page 39. *Some Dogmas of Religion*, page 127.

Note 14, page 48. See *Proceedings* of the Society for Psychical Research, Parts 53, 55, 57. Maclehose & Co., Glasgow. These volumes contain the record of a series of automatic writings purporting to be inspired by certain well-known men recently deceased. That they purport to be so inspired is, of course, in itself, no evidence that they are so. But the writings involve very curious and complicated correspondences between messages given independently to different automatists in different places. Such correspondences are conceivably explicable by a great extension of the hypothesis of telepathy; but there is an apparent deliberate effort to render that explanation as little plausible as possible. Altogether the writings

present a very difficult and interesting problem in evidence as to which it would probably be premature at present to come to any final conclusion. But the hypothesis that the messages do really proceed from the persons from whom they profess to proceed must, I think, be seriously considered.

Note 15, page 48. See a paper by Dr. Schiller (Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research, Part 49) discussing the answers obtained to a "Questionnaire" regarding human sentiment as to a future life, which was undertaken a few years ago by Dr. Richard Hodgson and the American Branch of the S. P. R.

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